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## **COLD CASE CLOSED AFTER ALMOST TWENTY YEARS Investigation Points to Murder**

BISMARCK – Kathy Bonderson's death has been a mystery for almost twenty years, but today, her family has some answers. Attorney General Wayne Stenehjem announced that the Cold Case Investigations team had uncovered enough evidence to conclude that Kathy was murdered.

On October 25, 1987, the body of 35 year old Kathryn Jean Bonderson was discovered in a burning vehicle just north of New Rockford. Initially the death was determined to be a traffic fatality, but a later autopsy revealed that Kathy was dead before the vehicle fire. By that time, however, the evidence was cold.

"Kathy's family and friends never believed she was killed in a freak accident, and they have waited nearly twenty years for the truth to be uncovered. The investigation is complete. We are now confident that some time during the early morning hours of October 25, 1987, Kathy was murdered by her husband, Robert Bonderson. Whether he killed her in a cold and calculated act, or in the heat of an argument, we will never know for certain," said Stenehjem.

Kathy's case file remained open until it was chosen as the first case for review by the Attorney General's Cold Case Investigations team. The team, which was formed in November 2005, includes two active BCI agents as well as retired agents and investigators. The team worked closely with the Eddy County sheriff's office and Eddy County state's attorney Travis Peterson during their investigation.

The Cold Case investigators reviewed the police reports and autopsy records from 1987. To better understand the events of October 25<sup>th</sup> and the vehicle damage, the investigators reviewed the police reports, witness statements, evidence and photographs. They interviewed Kathy's family and friends, and re-interviewed potential witnesses. The autopsy showed Kathy died before the fire and that there were injuries to her neck and throat that were not consistent with a vehicle accident or fire. The cold case investigation provided new information and fresh leads.

Investigators learned that during the evening of October 24<sup>th</sup>, Robert and Kathy argued. Later that night Robert drove out of town, at one point passing his stepson, Jamie, and his girlfriend. In the early morning hours of October 25<sup>th</sup>, the family's 1974 Ford Torino was found engulfed in flames on the side of a gravel road north of New Rockford. Kathy's body was on the floor of the passenger side. Crime lab reports indicate there was gasoline residue in the passenger compartment of the vehicle. An almost empty container of gasoline was discovered in a field between the burning vehicle and the

edge of New Rockford. Although the investigation could not determine the exact cause of Kathy's death, it did rule out a vehicle accident or fire as the cause.

Robert later moved to Thermopolis, Wyoming and married his girlfriend. In February 2006, the Cold Case Investigators contacted Robert to explain the work they were doing to investigate Kathy's death. They made arrangements to interview him about the events of twenty years ago. On the day he was supposed to meet with the investigators, Robert disappeared. He left behind his wallet containing cash and credit cards. Investigators worked with authorities in Wyoming to track Robert's bank and credit card accounts, but there was no activity after the date he disappeared.

Robert's body was discovered in April in a remote location in the Montana mountains. It appears he had killed himself rather than face questioning about Kathy's death.

"Robert Bonderson played the part of a grieving husband, but not well enough. He tried to cover up the truth but eventually his lies were unraveled – and that proved to be too much for him to live with," said Stenehjem. "There is no statute of limitations on murder and he would have been forced to answer for his crime. Robert took his guilt to the grave but at least now Kathy can rest in peace."

The Cold Case Investigation team presented its report of the investigation to Eddy County State's Attorney Travis Peterson.

Peterson determined that, had he been alive, there was probable cause to arrest Robert and place him on trial for Kathy's murder. "Based on the evidence gathered by the Bureau of Criminal Investigation and the Eddy County Sheriff's Department, it appears Mr. Bonderson was the primary suspect and responsible for Kathy's death," said Peterson.

Eddy County Sheriff Larry Schagunn said, "I appreciate the work the Bureau of Criminal Investigation did in this case. The agents were professional and determined. I am also grateful for the formation of the Cold Case team that was set up by the Attorney General. It is a fantastic job to be able to answer a lot of the questions and frustrations for Kathy's family and friends."

Stenehjem also thanked Sheriff Schagunn and the BCI investigators who worked on the case for the countless hours and extraordinary effort they had put into the investigation.

Kathy Bonderson's murder was the first case reviewed by the Attorney General's Cold Case Investigations team. The team is currently reviewing several other cases at the request of local law enforcement agencies.